

KENTE CLOTH MOTIFS

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The town of Bonwire, Ghana, located just fifteen miles east of Kumasi, is the principal *kente* weaving center of the Ashanti region. The Chief of Bonwire, Nana Okai Ababio, is especially proud of his people's development of *kente*, the Asantehene's choice as the royal fabric. Inquiries about this weaving art evoke in the chief a mood of respectful traditional formality, and before revealing the genius of his ancestors, Nana Ababio insists that libations be offered in their memory. He may then relate the myth of Ananse, the clever spider who taught Krugu Amoaya and Watah Kraban, two farmers of Bonwire, how to weave. The lesson was learned from the web of Ananse and duplicated first in white and then in black and white yarns for presentation to the Asantehene, Nana Osei Tutu (ca. 1700). The work was continued in black and white until the reign of Asantehene Nana Agyeman Prempeh (ca. 1900) when colored yarns were made available to the numerous weavers who inhabited Bonwire and the neighboring towns of Baman and Aমেপে. In tribute to the Oyoko clan and Nana Prempeh, the first cloth made with the new colored threads was called *Öyokoman* (Outside Back Cover). This cloth is characterized by red, green and yellow striped areas.

Ashanti *kente* is similar to all West African *kente* in that it is manufactured in narrow strips approximately four inches wide which incorporate weft designs arranged so that when the strips are sewn together, the completed cloth has a patchwork appearance. Warps may be either one solid color or striped, and it is the composition of the warp and the color and variation of the stripes that give the cloth its name. The weft designs that are woven over and perpendicular to the fundamental theme of the warp serve to enhance the warp's beauty and are not necessarily considered when naming the fabric. However, each weft design also has a name, so when ordering a cloth from the weaver, one must specify both the cloth and the designs to be incorporated.

Ashanti *kente* is unlike other West African weaves because of the intricacy of the designs, the fineness of the thread used, the variety of colors, and the perfection with which the weave is executed. For a man's cloth normally measuring 10 feet by 8 feet, twenty to twenty-four 10-foot-long strips are sewn together. The warp is prepared for cloths of this size by walking the threads between two sticks that are approximately 250 feet apart; each color of the warp is walked separately and tied. Only after the warp threads are wound into a bundle and removed from the two sticks is the striped pattern of the warp arranged. The entire warp when unfurled to be set on the loom almost magically takes the pattern seeded by the weaver. In all, a warp will consist of approximately 300 strings which are threaded through two heddles (*asatia* and *asanan*) and a comb (*kyereë*). The *asatia* yields a warp-to-weft ratio of less than one, so that using this heddle allows the warp theme to appear. The *asanan* holds groups of four to six threads, yielding a warp-to-weft ratio of less than one, allowing the weft design to dominate. The *asatia* can be worked either with the feet, similar to the *asatia*, or with the hands and a manually emplaced spreader called *tabono*. Most designs are woven by using the *asanan* manually and weaving double and triple strands of weft yarn into the warp with the fingers. This aspect of the actual weaving operation is the most time-consuming; otherwise, with the shuttles (*crucruwa*) work is very rapid.

Traditionally, each strip is begun and concluded with a group, or head, or five designs, of which *Nnwōtoa*, "snail's bottom" (Figs. 3, 12), and *Babadua*, named for a common tree of Ashanti (Fig. 1), are most commonly used. Less expensive weaves will have heads composed of *Akyēm* (resembling the skin upon which the Asantehene rests his feet while sitting in state) and *Nsatia*, "fingers." The five designs are always arranged so that, as in the most expensive weaves, *Nnwōtoa* and another design, such as *Aperēmoo*, "can-

LEFT: KENTE CLOTH DESIGNS. 1 & 5. BABADUA. 2 & 4. NKYEMFERE. 3. NNWOTOA. FIGURES 1-5 COMPOSE THE HEAD. 6. FA HIA KO TWERE AGYEMAN. 7. NSATEA. 8. OWO AKOFORO ADOBE. 9. MPUAA NKRON. 10. NKYIMKYIM. RIGHT, TOP TO BOTTOM: 11. BOAFO YE NA CLOTH WITH BABADUA AND PUDUO DESIGNS. 12. TATA KORO OR ANKONAM WITH BABADUA, NKYEMFERE, NNWOTOA AND NKYIMKYIM DESIGNS. 13. EDWINI ASA WEAVE WITH PUDUO AND KYIMKYIM DESIGNS. 14. AKYEMPEMENE, COMPOSED OF MPUAA NKRON. PART OF THE HEAD DESIGN IS INCLUDED. 15. EKA OBI NKO ANKA M'AWU WITH BABADUA AND NKYIMKYIM.



non,” or *Nkyemferē*, “broken pots,” are repeated, while *Babadua* appears once; whereas on adjacent strips, *Nnwōtoa* appears only once and the other design and *Babadua* are repeated. As an example, the arrangement of the head of one strip will be *Nnwōtoa*-design-*Babadua*-design-*Nnwōtoa*, while on adjacent strips one will find *Babadua*-design-*Nnwōtoa*-design-*Babadua* (Figs. 1-5).

Between the head pieces, warp-faced plain or striped sections alternate with weft-designed sections. It is planned that when all the strips are assembled, this alternation will extend to the entire cloth. The designed areas usually continue the pattern established in the head, so that the *Babadua* design, or sometimes *Akyēm*, will accompany alternately some other design of the weaver's choice. Two commonly woven sections consist of *Babadua*-design-*Babadua*, or *Akyēm*-design-*Akyēm*-the same design-*Akyēm*. In the most expensive weave, called *Edwini asa*, “ideas finished,” (Fig. 13), the entire warp is completely covered by the weft designs woven over it. These cloths take the experienced weaver from one to two months to weave.

Though the techniques that have been employed by generations of Bonwire *kente* weavers are interesting to those who wish to continue the tradition by actually weaving *kente* cloth, the names that have been given to the warp themes and weft designs are generally of more interest to ethnologists and art historians. Many of the names are purely descriptive, reflecting common objects of the Ashanti natural and historical environment. The most interesting allude to Ashanti proverbs, especially when the proverb has

some obvious correlation to the color pattern being described. It is sometimes difficult to discern why the weaver has selected a particular name for a cloth. His choice may have been influenced by personal circumstances at the time of the cloth's origination, or by the color composition of the weave itself. In no case does the name have anything to do with the occasion on which a cloth may be worn or presented. One cloth with a name of ambiguous derivation is *Eka obi nko anka m'awu*, “Somebody wishes my death” (Fig. 15). *Sika fre mogya*, “Money calls blood,” and *Owu nhye da*, “Death has no fixed date” (Fig. 17), show much more correlation between color theme and the names given to them. *Sika fre mogya* implies that a person's wealth will lead his relatives or a thief to rob and kill him. *Owu nhye da* is said to encourage people to live hardworking and morally constructive lives, as death may come unexpectedly and allow no time for penitence.

Some combinations of warp theme and weft design can form paradoxical juxtapositions, appreciable only through an understanding of the names given them. The cloth named *Sika ne barima*, “Money is man” (Fig. 18), which incorporates a design called *Fa hia kō twere Agyeman*, “Take poverty and go lean on Agyeman” (Fig. 6), is an example. The proper meaning of *Sika ne barima* is that with the prestige and influence of money, one is free to do whatever he pleases. The name of the weft design means that people in need go to one who has riches, whether he be the Asantehene (for whom Agyeman, after Nana Agyeman Prempeh, is often an appellation) or any rich member of the family. These two color compositions

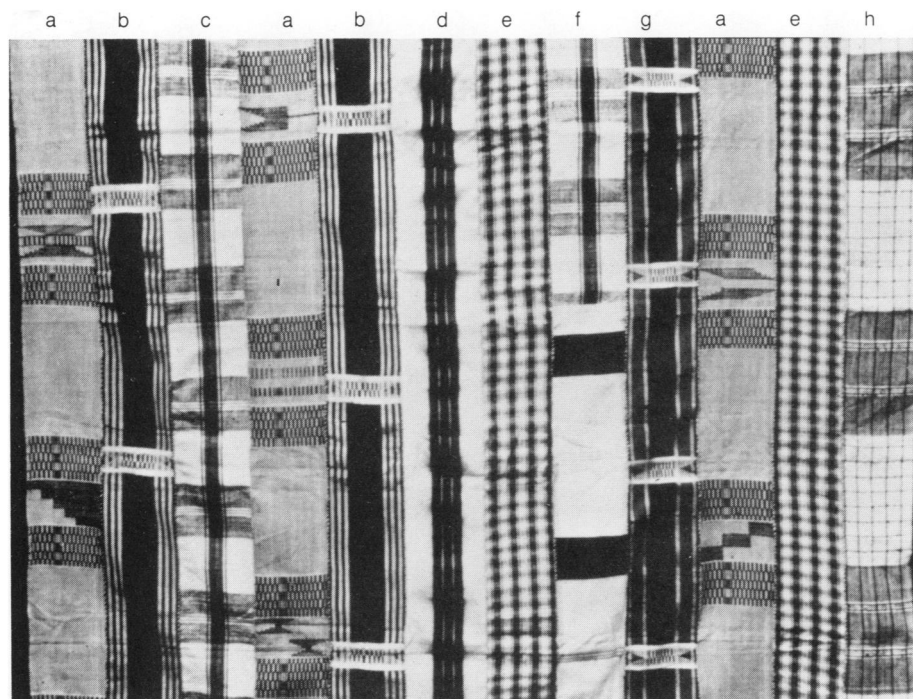
concisely summarize the importance of wealth to the Ashanti community and to the welfare of the family.

Obi nykēyn obi ēkwa musi (Inside Back Cover) is one cloth that is artistically suggestive of its name. It translates as, “One is no better than another in getting into the road,” implying that all men are equal in sin. There are many other ways of interpreting this proverb, all of which manifest a statement of brotherhood. The designs in this particular example are *Nkyimkyim*, “zigzag,” (Fig. 10), *Ōdofo awaamu*, “the back of the lover,” and *Ōwō akōforo adobē*, “The snake climbs up the palm tree” (Fig. 8).

Distrust and suspicion of one's fellow man is reflected in the names of three particular cloths. This attitude, perhaps inherent in the nature of businessmen, is found in the Ashanti in Ghana, who have traditionally controlled the riches and their distribution in the country. *Suro onipa*, “Fear man” (Fig. 26), implies that one should always be wary of another's intentions. In this cloth, the design *Nkō dumasa*, “My work is finished,” must accompany a solid background. A green or blue background with any other design or combination of designs is called *Abusua ye dom*, “Family is war” (Fig. 13). Life in the very large extended families of West Africa is very competitive and extremely inter-dependent. Those who are rich must carry the financial burden for the rest of the family, which may encompass linearly three generations and extend laterally to second and third cousins. Other cloths that are woven with solid background colors are *Akyempemhene* (Fig. 14) which must include the design *Mpuua nkron*, “nine *mpuua*,” (*mpuua* is a popular hairstyle) (Fig. 9); *Fatia fata Nkrumah*, meaning Fatia, Kwame Nkrumah's wife, befits him (the name was changed after 1966 to *Baakofoa mmu ōman*, “One man cannot rule a nation”), which is *Edwini asa* weave composed entirely of *Nkyimkyim* and *Mpuua nkron* designs; *Sika futuro*, “gold dust,” which usually includes *Akyēm* as one of the designs; and *Yene hene*, “We have no chief.”

Some cloths bear proverb names that express the evil in the world, such as *Nkum me fie na nkosu me aboten*, “Don't kill my house and then mourn for me in public” (Fig. 22), which reminds one of man's insincerity and duplicity. It is universally true that few will help another unless it is profitable for all, that help received is often soon forgotten, and that as a result, few are willing to help. Three Ashanti proverbs express these ideas: *Woforo dua paa na ye pia wo*, “If you pick a good tree to climb, we will help push you up” (Fig. 23); *Papa nko akyiri*, “Good does not go far”; and *Boafo ye na*, “Helpers are scarce” (Fig. 11).

There are a number of warp themes with names that are purely descriptive, but which are uniquely interpreted in the cloth. Those illustrated in this article in-



16. CLOTH CALLED *NSAASAAWAAH* OR *MAAMAN* (“MIXTURE”), COMPOSED OF MANY DIFFERENT STRIPS: a. *KWAME KYERETWIE*, WITH COAL POT AND ATWEDEE (“STAIRS”) DESIGNS. b. *KYEKYE AMPONSEM*. c. *ETE SI W'ANI*. d. *OFODUA*. e. *AFRUMU ASO*. f. *NKONTOMPO NTOMA* WITH *ABANKUO AKYI* (“THE BACK OF THE BEETLE”).

clude: *Tata korö*, also called *Ankonam* (Fig. 12, Inside Back Cover) which means "only child" or "I walk alone," suggesting on the one hand independence, and on the other, solitude and loneliness; *Nyankontön*, "rainbow" (Fig. 20); *Aburo ahaban*, "corn stalk leaf"; *Ntokoseë*, "large buttocks" (Fig. 19), an attribute of beauty to West African women; *Agyenegyensu*, named for insect larvae or fish common to West Africa that clear muddy water.

Very few black-and-white cloths are currently in production, but they were the first products of the weaver's art when the craft was being developed. The black-and-white weaves that one finds today may include many of the original designs that were later modified to contemporary color motifs. Examples of some of these weaves are illustrated here in *Nsaasaawaah* (Fig. 16) which is sometimes called *Maaman*, meaning "mixture." The strips that compose this cloth are: *Kwame kyeretwie* (Fig. 16a), according to Ashanti folklore, the cloth worn by the Asantehene when he caught a tiger in the streets of Kumasi; *Kyekye Amponsem* (Fig. 16b), named in honor of the Chief of Denkyira; *Ete si w'ani* (Fig. 16c), describing a common ailment of the eye where vision is obstructed by a large white spot on the pupil; *Ofodua*, "monkey's tail" (Fig. 16d); *Afrumu aso*, "camel's ear" (Fig. 16e); *Nkontompo ntoma*, "liar's cloth" (Fig. 16f); *Kyekye denyem yemo*, "the belly of the crocodile"; *Akatewa aduasa*, "thirty *Akatewa* (pumpkin-like) seeds"; *Nkasawesewa*, "concise, well-worded speech" (Fig. 21); and *Obo egya*, "firefly."

Proverbs reveal the thought, customs, mores and beliefs of a culture. When these are expressed as artistic stylizations, a second dimension of understanding becomes possible. Ashanti weavers have skillfully united these two cultural attributes, reinforcing their own perceptual creativity and offering the people of other traditions a more precise interpretation of the Ashanti view of life. □

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17. OWU NYHE DA ("DEATH HAS NO FIXED DATE") WITH BABADUA, ANINTONNWI ("EYEBROW") and NKO DUMASA ("MY WORK IS FINISHED"). 18. SIKA NE BARIMA ("MONEY IS MAN") WITH BABADUA AND FA HIA KO TWERE AGYEMAN ("TAKE POVERTY AND GO LEAN ON AGYEMAN"). 19. NTKOSEE ("LARGE BUTTOCKS"). 20. NYANKONTON ("RAINBOW") WITH AKYEM, EKYE ("HAT") AND MPUDUO ("POTS"). 21. NKASAWESEWA. 22. NKUM ME FIE NA NKOSU ME ABOTEN ("DON'T KILL MY HOUSE AND THEN MOURN FOR ME IN PUBLIC") WITH AKYEM AND ANINTONNWI. 23. WO FORO DUA PAA NA YE PIA WO ("IF YOU PICK A GOOD TREE TO CLIMB, WE WILL HELP PUSH YOU UP") WITH BABADUA AND EMMA ("STICKS"). 24. PAPA NKO AKYIRI ("GOOD DOES NOT GO FAR") WITH BABADUA AND SEKAN ("KNIFE"). 25. WIASE YE SUM ("THE WORLD IS DARK") WITH BABADUA, ANINTONNWI, AND PART OF THE HEAD: NNWOTOA-SEKAN-BABADUA. 26. SURO ONIPA ("FEAR MAN").

